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Mothering ground

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By

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For Mom and Dad--

who believed in maverick passions.

THE BUTCHER WOMAN STORY

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I have called him down from the McArty Grade to shoot the bay. The night, so close and black around the barn, in hours will go mean. I sit tired in the bronc stall, forehead pressed into my knees, out of reach of her hooves if she wants to struggle. Her lungs are full, I know it. I had come down to check for cows having trouble, for swell-tongued calves that wouldn't drop. And while the heifers blew and moved a little in their beds, I heard the mucous pop in the nose of the bay.

Even now in February, on cottonwoods old as this barn, leaves hold stubborn and clatter in the wind. But for the sleepy rustling of cattle and the rale of the bay, it is the only sound. With the slide door open, I listen for the thrum of his tired pick-up coming down the road.

I believed his whole bit for years. He had me dead-sure convinced the lights that flashed above our stark foothills ridge were the northern lights. Early before graining, or on winter nights after supper and chores, I'd sit in a feed trough that had been polished smooth by the

gritty tongues of decades of greedy cattle and stare out at the night. And there among our black cows, only hearing their cough and slow grinding of cud, I dreamed a kinship with the Eskimo, click-clacking my own wireless messages through the still Montana skies, up across the Hi-line to a white land where Yukon Indians gnawed blubber and the sun played tricks off the ice.

But after the kid trust wore off, and I knew about aurora borealis and that the sun and ice make those neons across the north sky only on rare, clear nights, still, if we were out in the dark, he'd point off to lights flashing yellow and call out, "northern lights." Out on the asphalt, big tractor rigs pulled grades and plunged throttle-wild down the backside, high-beams burning out the way. And when the far off rumble of gears and mutter of air brakes carried over from the highway, he'd just look away and spit. He liked the mystery of it.

He'd lived atop the Grade always, up the road and above us, and never once did I think anything of his coming to visit evenings and then being there first thing, before light, in the morning. Evenings, with the round kitchen table between them, he and mother would smile at each other in front of me, and he'd hum along with the radio, tuned to swing, the signal weak from distance of storm and alive with static. Beneath the table, they'd shuffle their feet to

the music, watching each other's eyes and dancing together, with me there between them, watching their eyes. Running his thick rancher's hand over my head, he'd threaten my cowlick with axle grease and run me off to bed. And I thought it was fine and right, as fine and right as the lie of the northern lights.

In the chilly kitchen, in the mornings, he'd smile through the steam of his coffee at mother. And finally out from under the weight of the long sleep, the fat quilt and mother's hand, his chest would loosen. He'd wrench loose the phlegm with big-man coughs that heaved his body out of the chair, and then, catching some breath, shake his head at me and at mom and give us that look, that smile that said, "Just look at me, I'm old."

That was his look. He was a little old and liked it, and he liked being on the Grade alone with his age as the last savvy old man in the country. He made a kingdom of age up there, above the curves and beaver pools and scoury bogs of the creek, on the Grade, waiting for the younger men of the drainage to come to him for answers. So he'd stitch their cattle's forced wombs, make the tricky weld, doctor the blind and tender-bellied calf.

He surrounded himself with ancient things: his rusted and groaning truck, creased, dirty silverbelly and straw hats on racks, bleaching planks and poles, and worn cattle

he hated to sell, living by that old-timey notion that they either made it or they didn't. Turn them out in the Breaks and leave them hunt up the best coulees, the best feed, and beat winter at the game. And when their useful days were over, he'd just one day find them, twelve-year olds stiff with cold and death, the calves half out of them, bloated and ripe, the rangy old girl too tired to go through it all again. This was his culling, "by nature's way, goddamn it, and they always had calves that done well, and learned it from mother cow out there in the Breaks as they ought," he'd preach, solemn as any priest at gospel, arms out stiff and pointing all along the Breaks, a graying, mournful witching stick, dowsing up free, open range, a hundred years gone and buried under four-wire fences and bones of blizzard-killed cattle.

The fluid bubbles from her nostrils, and snow sifts quietly through the cracks in the withered and hoof-splintered planks of this barn. I hold my breath with her sighs, waiting for our next inhale. It would be easy to sleep, but for the big bulb, bare and swaying above the box stall. It would be easy to sleep if not for that and the slow breathing. The timid breathing and the pendulum-slow swinging of the bulb in the wind. And through the slow,

slow rasp of the lung and the wind, I begin to hear his story of the Mussellshell, his voice there in the stall saying, "You can bet I was there, Partner, and I knew them fellers," his best story of the cowboy stud-poker game with a ranch for stakes and cows for ante. I loved it to be true, because he said he'd been there and watched the whole goings-on from behind the circle of chairs and spittoons and hunched shoulders of men hiding cards. Pursing up his lips, he hummed some old cow song, working against tight lungs, and got me set in the mood. It was the butcher woman story.

Through the black of a Mussellshell night, in this country he said he knew, a light blazed. Inside a lonesome saloon, under a hissing kerosene lamp, two men set down their cards. With a sigh as big as a chinook wind, one player pushed himself up from the table, drug a crippled leg across the boards and ordered whiskey at the bar. He laid his gnarled hands on the plank. He studied his scarred and horrible face in the backbar mirror, and studied his hands, really no more than claws, the middle fingers snubbed close at the palm. And then, raising his glass clamped tight in a talon, he toasted the smiling, ugly mask glaring from the mirror.

Behind him, at the table, under the smoking lamp, a young cowboy's smile spread, grew into a laugh and whoop, and finally into a hell-bent, all-nighter celebration of win

with a bottle and a whore. He was a man with cattle and ground now, and the next day he spurred his pony off up river to his new-won place. With his collar pulled tight against the late fall blow, he began to sing, louder and louder, until the tune was a screech as he tried to out-sing the wind. There alone and rich on the Mussellshell, he thought himself something.

The ranch house squatted among cottonwoods, and walking his horse up from the river, he noticed smoke pluming from the chimney and bones and hide scattered in the yard. Two lame dogs looked up from a joint of leg bone and scrambled down in a clumsy, stumbling flurry to heel them, nipping boot leather and fetlock. And as the pony balked and jerked bug-eyed at its tether, the young cowboy stepped through the low door of the cottonwood house. Inside, stoking a mound of coals, was a woman, left by the hacked-up poker player as part of the deal, alone there in the company of cows and dogs. She was the woman of the place and she was stock. Her children were catalogue dolls she kept sitting in the windows, their porcelain faces yellowed by the sun. As he watched, she changed their positions around the house so their marble eyes could see out over new parts of the place always. She passed her hands over their hair. Without a word, she fetched coffee, shuffling around the kitchen clucking happily, popping her tongue against the top of her

mouth like the clop of a horse's hoof on hard earth or a swallowed clock. The cowboy bolted his coffee, avoiding her marble eyes, and went off quick to check the herd. Hand on the horn, he rested his forehead against the cool leather of the saddle seat, while all around him bones bleached and ragged hides crackled in the breeze. He swung up, confused by this woman and her dogs and dolls, his head aching from a night of bad booze, the oven-hot kitchen, and the pop of the tongue in her mouth.

Most especially on fall nights, as if the weather itself coaxed it out of him, he liked to tell his story to mother and me, sitting around the table in the kitchen. He'd let the clucking sink in and let us picture the yard of bones while he hummed with the swing and pulled deep on a roll-yer-own or store bought crook. Finally he'd motion to mother to click off the radio--we knew this was it--and leaning over the table on his elbows, tell how the young cowboy's horse, spooked by something in the brush, tumbled over a soft cutbank, and how man and horse lay in the clay, head to head, a tangle of limbs and twisted stirrup leather and fractured saddle. He told us of the kind of day it was, how the sky looked, and the look in the horse's eye, as though he'd been setting a rock across the creek from the bank, having a smoke, listening casual to the panicky whinny of the horse, the cracking of bone, the quick breathing in

the dirt. He told how, through the black mist of daze, the cowboy heard dogs snuffling and sniffing over him and then were gone, and how the woman appeared in his dream, looming out of the fog, a red babushka wrapped around her face, calm and smiling through the mist, breath on his face, clucking her tongue, cluck-clucking as she sawed a broken limb. He heard the rip of the blade and the snap of the bone, thinking in his dream that a three-legged cow pony ain't no good to anyone, remembering the ribs and bones and scraps of hide in the yard, thinking it is his horse all along until, in the far-off distance of dream, he hears the shot--the slapping, flat thud of lead into live bone, the shot that puts a brute to sleep. And he's off on a travois to the low, hot house, listening to the blades of knife and saw clank against the thighs of this woman, smiling happy with her new man, the dogs still scrapping over the fresh-cut chunk of man meat beside his good, dead horse in the clay.

When he stopped the story, chopping off the last word, there was just the dull bumble of the furnace, his raggedy breathing, and, as if he had it planned to ice the whole business in memory, the evil tick-tocking of the clock on the wall.

The frosted weather drew it out of him. The season was his backdrop: you pictured the cowboy in cottonwoods going yellow and felt that Canada killing wind cut through his

slicker. And like the weather just one day makes up its mind to pull the leaves off the trees and ice up the creek, so it kind of took her, too, with the season. It was still fall, but the wind came cold early. While the leaves went brittle and cattle bawled at the fence line for feed, the cough in her went deeper and deeper until she gave in to it, and now I have to remember the story myself, and remember him and his lies and my mother and him together.

Through the open door of the barn, I see the moon shining through ruptures in the clouds, giving the night's dead cover a sudden daytime life. But a high wind patches the wound and it is dark again. I listen for the rumblings of the tractors over the divide on the highway, and for the clatter of his truck down off the Grade. But there is only the hiss of icy snow against the corral boards and out near the road, the stubborn leaves turning against themselves. I am sleepy and the night goes on forever. Nothing works toward making it come day: moon and wind have frozen the night in place. Those Eskimos will have light forever while this long winter dark holds on in my valley. In the tack room I grab the bay's blanket and sit with her again. The eyes are rolled back in her head. I start breathing with her and press my face into the crook of my arm to block out

the light. My eyes and breath fight against the air in the close-in stall. Her breaths are long and fragile: the long blow out, and then that teetering pause, my pulse loud in my ears, that second when it's easiest to die, and then, at last, the weak inhale. In that time before she retrieves breath, she isn't alive or dead, but stuck between. I breathe with her as she fights for air. I take the huge breath and hold it with her, so tired under the bulb, the bulb like a little sun moving above us, the wind sighing past the door, the slow, slow breathing and waiting for breath, fighting against the humid air and the long night, head in my arm across my knees. I reach out for her mane, the long, uncropped mane, and in a nodding jerk of sleep, I stroke the graying hair spread out on the pure white pillow case. Lying on the big mattress, she seems lost in it, her hands upturned on the quilt like dead birds and I can do nothing. I have called up to the Grade.

I loved them there at the table, sitting like man and wife, father and mother. I was happy to be young and sit on the floor in the kitchen with my back against the heat duct in the wall, feeling the pulse of the house as it breathed heavier in late fall. In those months, all kinds of birds thrumped into the glass of the big kitchen window. He said

it was the wild plums that did it. Waxwings and starlings and sparrows, cowbirds and grackles, all drunk on fermented plums left on the tree, careening off and crashing into the window. I'd run out and see them flutter around in the lilacs there below the glass. Sometimes they'd recover and fly off and land in a heap, twisting their heads around in all directions, drunken, reckless pilots goofy on plums and testing the air. Many times they were dead in the bush, atilt on their backs, wings still spread to fly. I'd run out when I heard the thump, the two of them sitting there smiling at each other, the smoke from their cigarettes mingling up to the ceiling. Then, with my butt against the warm duct, the drone of the furnace and their voices together putting me to sleep in my corner of the kitchen, I'd hear him say how he figured it was mighty lively curiosity from such a dead cat, while the house breathed and my mother laughed me to sleep.

I follow along the breathing of the bay. The long, limbo pause between inhale and out-blow makes the stall swim around. It is all very slow: the breathing and the passing of the night. Through the plank-thin wall, I feel the movement of a cow, laying close against the boards, and hear the steady grinding of her teeth, working a cud. She scrapes

her jaws round and round, marking the barn's own slow time like the ticking of a clock.

I rest my forehead in my arm. Inside the bay, lungs and bones and heart are all melting, and her life is flowing out sticky on the floor. She's just a shell of hide and hoof, leather stretched on ribs. It's better to cover my eyes than watch this tide flood out at my feet and reflect up the hard light.

From some detail in the story, I know how to do it. Draw that imaginary line from each ear to opposite eyeball. Lay the muzzle close and fire the slug in where the lines cross. That's the ticket. I learned it from the butcher woman. She clicked back the hammer and finished it.

Under the winter-long forelock and under the skin, I rub the V-ridge of bone on the bay's forehead as she labors hard for crucial air. And like I massage her memory there beneath the skull, her legs twitch in a sad, laid-out canter--her last brave try at making it.

It was only after her colt got hit by the train, pawing for grass between the ties on the Shonkin Sag that she got funny, this good mare. We wintered them there where the wind snapped down from over the jawbone line of the Highwoods and blew the long, lower ridges bare. We didn't feed. By spring, they were ugly with hair, wild as elk, and seeing us bump along the fence-line towards them in his old

truck, they'd whirl and line out away from us, heads high and blowing steam and looking beautiful then. They ran together like good cavalry horses, or like those Lippesans, or the long-bred horses of a king. I pounded the oat pan against the door and we took turns calling them no-good-goddamn-rotten-sonsabitches as they moved steadily away from us over one long ridge after another, sonsabitches, the long hair flying off them as they busted through the brush, god-damn them, but I thought they were beautiful just the same, beautiful, wild, running sonsabitches.

But that was before. After the colt died under the wheels of the Great Northern, the bay was no good. The wild stayed on her all year round. Even when she ate oats from the pan, her ears were laid back tight to her head and her eyes showed mostly white as she twitched a graceful leg. But I forgave her through it all. I kept her down at home to feed her all winter and so she wouldn't have to remember that Shonkin deal. But here it is February and she is dying.

It is much colder now as the storm gets going, and the snow that forces itself through the cracks is icy and sparkles under the light. Hanging from a long cord, the bulb sways with the wind, and all the shadows grow and

shrink, and it makes her look like she's moving. But she only lays there, stretched out and barely breathing. I go to the door and listen up the Grade. I sit with her in the stall, her blanket over my knees, and breathe deep her musty sweat when I hide my eyes. I breathe in her slow rhythm again, while the wind sucks at the barn's dirty panes and blows at the door and the rafters creak. This is the same bad wind that killed her, and that shuddered the house on the last day. He came and saw her there under the quilt and patted the white hands and petted her forehead.

"She doesn't look good," he said.

"No, not good."

"Do you think she looks better?"

"No, not better, really."

"I'll better call to town again," he said.

We'd gone back to the big, empty kitchen and had coffee and tried to avoid the picture of her in that chair. He talked about cattle and calves, cocking his head to the side, like a bird on a post, old-man looking. He got up stiff and walked out to his truck in the yard and drove slowly up to the Grade. So I tried to picture him, sitting at his table up there, watching out the window our cattle down along the creek. He liked to go out and see what the smoke did, rising from the chimney, catching a wind south or east, reading the weather in it.

I sat at the table and stared out the kitchen window. It was getting on in the fall and the birds were most of them south.

After he left, her breathing got slower and harder and she heaved up her chest, like all the air had gone out of the room and she had to pull it in from some far part in the house. I called the Grade and sat with her. The pauses in her breath got longer, and then the one pause, as I sat there, the edge of her quilt pulled over my knees in the chair by the bed, that last pause that kept on. Without looking at her, I waited for it to become another moment, waiting for the inhale, waited with all my breath. That is all I could do, help her breathe.

Up behind the house in a deep cleft of coulee was the little plot with an iron fence where the bears once dug up Grandpa. After the service in the icy church in town, he had come down from the Grade, trenched the frozen dirt and put her in it.

"Well, that's it, I guess," he said.

"Yes, I guess."

"It looks good with the grass trimmed down."

"The cows got in."

"Well, it look mighty good."

We went together to the kitchen and he poured us bourbon and we drank together like men. And when he got up to leave, he ran that rough hand across my head, and bending down, startled me by pressing his wet, whiskered cheek rough and scary against my neck. That was the last time he came.

There was no hurry to check cattle that next day. While the bay mare eyed me from the pen, I poked out of the yard on mother's favorite blue gelding, riding up the county road to the creek-bottom forty. The sun was bright and the wind had gone down, and I watched what little breeze there was pile up fall's waste in the fence lines: leaves, tin cans left from brandings, the paper wrappings from baling twine. As I came around the corner of the creek, I saw his rusted truck pulled in behind the calf shed. I got off and opened the gate, led the gelding through, closed it, and jogged up to the door of the shed.

It was the look he gave me that scared me so much. There in the shadows of the calving shed, an old black baldy was snubbed tight to an upright, breathing hard under the rope, lolling out her tongue. He sat spraddled out on the frozen manure, sweating heavy, head dropped forward, breathing hard against his old-man asthma, and hating me for finding him there like that. I looked from his eye, cocked up at me from under the brim of his hat, to the bulging eye of a big-headed calf, stuck tight in the pink opening of its

mother. The puller chain hung down from its white hooves. They stood out in the dark.

I set the fork of the come-along up under the nose of the calf and hooked up the chain. He struggled to his feet behind me, and then, as I worked the handle of the puller, he moved his thick hands around the head, pulling out and down, sticking his finger inside the calf's mouth, clearing fluid, until finally the head squeezed through bone and the calf slipped out and plopped heavy on the ground at our feet. The cow moaned and the saliva hung long from her tongue. He stuck a long piece of straw far up the calf's nostrils and it sneezed itself to life. I shook loose the rope, and we stood back and waited for the old girl to take to her new bull calf, glistening with her own insides. And then he went to his truck and drove off to the hill, leaving the gate open at the road for me to close. He drove up the road and up to the Grade, and I waited a long time to see the smoke from his chimney curl above the timber. I stood in the door of the shed for an hour and waited to see the smoke, but it never came. He sat in a cold house, up there atop the Grade.

But now the snow has come, mother is dead up there in the coulee, and he has not been off the McArty Grade. Here

in the bronc stall, I can almost see myself in the sweat of the bay's heaving side. Outside, the wind drives snow along the ground. My body is heavy and I breathe with her. The bulb swings in the wind, and on the other side of the barn, cattle shuffle in the straw. The wind pulses around the barn, pulses through holes in its planks and stone foundation. I press my face hard into the blanket, smelling her and feeling her on my skin. I am so close, like her colt, slapping his muzzle greedy into her tits, the slick bay hair brushing across eyes and nose, the smell, searching into the dark and comfortable musty warmth of her.

On an upright, smooth from rope and rubbing, the pistol is hung by a nail. The snubbed bullets nose like maggots from their holes. She lays stretched full length, pushing up her sides against the weight of the air. I sit again beside her, the gun in my lap, breathing of the blanket and remembering them there in the kitchen, the stare across the table, smiling, the three of us there together.

I stand at the slide door in the daylight, and the light, skittering across the new, icy snow from nighttime, pushes around me and glares off the mucous pooling in the stall. Her nostrils are bright pink and thin crescents of brown show above the huge white of her eyes. I set the

bay's blanket on the ground beneath a dingy window and look out over her place this last time. The last, tough leaves on the cottonwoods move together like the bow hands of fiddlers. A calf bawls behind me in the barn, and as the last of the cry gurgles in its throat, I hear a scratching behind me on the glass. Perched on the sill, a barn mouse paws for balance against the untrustworthy pane, swathing his tongue across the window for all he's worth. I watch him lap hard and quick where someone once must have wiped a hand bloodied from a cut, or bad prolapse. The feet are desperate for traction, and the miniature tongue slaps fast-motion across the filthy glass. Finally, he tries with his thin teeth to scrape the last stubborn stain of man blood or colt or cow blood, standing man-like, holding the grimy window, his belly and mean little hands all lit up by the eight o'clock sun coming in horizontal. He casts a shadow across the bay mare.

I laid the blanket on the sticky puddle at her nose, and kneel in front of her, resting the pistol in my lap. I concentrate on the detail from the story, find the spot on her forehead and mine. She is laid out long and graceful in the small world of the stall, lit by a February sun. And as I kneel there, cradling the gun, the shadow is huge in the doorway, and his thick hand is grasping the jamb. I'd heard nothing outside the barn. He leads me stiff-legged across

the corral and the new snow in the yard to the house, his arm warm across my back, and puts me to bed. I hear him cough in the kitchen.

Out the window, I can see down across the creek to the trees by the road, and in the early stinging cold, I see crystals hang in the air. Far away, I hear the muffled shot and soon, the comfortable chugging of his truck lugging in gear. He drags the carcass of the bay, snubbed-up with chain, out of the barn and up the road. The February sun glares off the window panes, and the whiteness swallows them up.

* * *

A LAST LOW PASS

A LAST LOW PASS

I didn't understand that moon.

The snow hissed against the pavement, forced down from above, not falling, but tossed down by a December wind like a handful of shot. And through it all, that platter-big moon burned through, some kind of imposter sun, melting a hole in the storm.

I had closed the door carefully to not wake her, and stood out near the curb, the snow writhing around me on the street and rattling the dead branches of the trees, with the 5 A.M. moon making a shadow beside me.

In a minute I saw the low-beams easing up the street and knew it was him. It was dark, and I couldn't hear the sound of the engine for the snow, but I knew it was him. He was sure of his traction, and drove the middle of the road, as though the world should stand aside.

"Hey. Get in quick. Why're you standing on the street for?"

I moved my head back toward the house and smiled.

"I would've honked," he said. "Get in."

On the seat of the truck between us was a bottle of homemade port and a mickey of clear, rock-candy rye sent

from Wisconsin.

"What's with the sauce?"

"We're going to get tight," he said.

"And I thought we were going to get a bag full of greeners."

"Well that, and we're going to get tight," he said. "It's been too long."

"Just the rye would do it."

"It would."

We drove out of town east and the sun was still two hours on the other side of the world and we didn't say anything. I always had the feeling of being in church when it was black and snowing, with only the snow sighing against the window and the heater fan buzzing low. It was like early Mass, when all you could hear was the priest saying Latin way down in his throat and the old Italian and Bohunk women sighing deep and rheumy from the back of the church. They followed the rite in their hand-worn missals and murmured the prayers in their own old-country tongue. The lights were dim, high up by the ceiling, and the windows black, and when the priest wasn't talking the Latin, you could hear the old sad women breathing deep or coughing.

We liked not talking now. We thought the same things and it was much like talking. With the cab warm and the snow bumping the window in front of you, it was easy to fall

asleep. When Mike got heavy-lidded, he started his talking business.

"Could I ask you something?" This was how he got started on it.

"What?"

"Do you for the Christ's sake ever get tired of doing that?"

"What?"

"That with your fingers. 'This is the church, this is the steeple.' How old are you anyway?"

"What, this?" I held up my fingers locked together and two up to make the steeple of the church.

"Yes. That."

"Listen, would you do something for me?"

"Oh, Jesus. What?"

"Go screw yourself."

"So that's how it is," he said. "Listen, do you remember that fall when it was so warm and there weren't any ducks in the country so we went up to the lake and that warden. . .Schultz or some damn thing."

"It was Schmudee."

"It wasn't any damn Schmudee."

"Schmudee."

"Whatever it was, caught us with all those planted browns and you said, no, you didn't have a license but you

were sure I had one and you knew goddamn good and well I didn't have one?"

"I had a duck stamp."

"Goddamn it."

"Well, we both got fined, for the Christ's sake," I said.

"Yes, but that's how it always is, you trying to get me."

He was enjoying it.

"Now I know what you're saying," I said.

"Oh, you do?"

"You want to go fishing."

"Jesus."

"You want me to drive, Mike?"

"Shit."

"If you want me to drive, that's fine."

"Listen," he said, "would you do something for me?"

"Go out there and straddle that bob wire fence and run up and down and see what that does for you."

"Well, I'll just say no."

We drove for a while with him there smiling and hunched over the wheel watching the snow come in and the sky pale up.

"I remember that time at the lake," I said. "It was that fall right before I got married. I remember that real

well. Mary wasn't happy. Said my name in the paper was some kind of nice wedding present. She's something when she gets mad. Remember how she got? Oh, Christ."

Mike looked at me from across the dark cab and didn't say anything. The light from the dash made his face green and his eyes seemed too far back in his head. He was done talking. He was funny like that, talking away, and then he was done, like he just all of a sudden got tired of it, or the fun went out of it for him.

I went back to watching the snow come into the headlights and listening to it slide up across the glass. I listened to the hum of the tires on the blown-bare asphalt. And I thought about the way she folded back the corner of the blanket before we went to sleep, and how on cold nights she would be curled with her back to me, with just the top of her head showing in the light from the window. I would crawl in and curl in the same shape around her and feel the flannel of her prudish nightgown and her cold feet. I would say, "We just fit, don't we?" and she would reach and pull one of my hands over across her shoulder and hold it and go off to sleep.

We made plans. The snow would blow across the iced pane of the picture window and slowly cover the street. We would stare out from the couch like the storm was some great natural stage play, everything white but the grey elms'

trunks, dead columns holding up the low sky. And she would plan for spring, and springs to come. It was her thinking season. Like when you see the casket up in front of the chapel, or you see the white face, you think about them doing something before, when the blood ran in them. Now, in the dead season, she loved to think about the Missouri and what we would catch, and she talked about the branches of the elm, rubbing against the window when it would be heavy with leaves, and how it kind of puts you to sleep when the wind blows and moves it against the glass, stroking the pane like a hand. She talked about the river and what we would use there, and the colors the water would take from that enormous spring sky.

She made her dead-season plans and I was warm on the couch behind the frozen pane. And here in winter again, across the cab, Mike glared out at the flexings of the season. I hoped that he felt spring had to show, and that he and his girl made plans.

"Does she ever call you 'Honey'?" I asked.

"Jesus, where in hell did that come from?"

"If you're embarrassed just say so."

"Christ," he said. "Sure, I let her sometimes. I like it sometimes. She calls me Mikey and I don't like that. But Honey sometimes. There's nothing wrong there."

"No. That's good."

Mike, hard-eyeing the white drifting shoulder, eased the rig off the road and got out to scrape the windshield, the day so cold that the moaning defrost was losing ground. We poured coffee from the Thermos, adding just a bite of the rye.

"You ever notice how the oldtimers 'take' coffee?" Mike asked. "They don't have coffee. They take coffee."

"My Grandpa said it that way. He'd be splitting cottonwood in back of the house with Zebio Cordini and I'd be sitting there watching and he'd tell Zebio, 'let's take coffee'."

"Oh, yeah."

That white-hot moon was lost behind a grim, low sky, and the morning was still dark. But coming out of the close-in hills, I knew when we hit the creek: first the steam going up, then I could see it--a black line, trenched into the snow-covered stubblefields. As it coiled down the flat bottom of the valley and under the road through culverts and under bridges and the black criss-cross of trestles.

On every side the ground was worked, plowed fields with the dirt frozen and hard, with the grainy snow driven into the furrows, and above, in the slow growing light, the sky was just a huge reflection of the rutted ground. The clouds were low, and bunched and billowed down to the tops of the

steep hills along the stream. In this country, it was all Bohunk and Finlander nestors, and one of them had worked the dirt with duck foot and discs, and it was in deadwaiting for the spring.

Clouds crouched down and held the night in tight, and the snow blowing and the steam from the warm-water creek, boiling up around us, made the plank-flat valley a grey tunnel upstream. The defroster groaned in its throat, and the headlights went nowhere. Mike gripped the wheel, and I leaned my head against the frosted side window and thought about her at home, behind the frosted pane on that couch. And the dog there, stretched out and happy at her feet, breathing big-dog breaths so slow you think he will never wake up. That damned wolf, happy to be by her always, to have her in sight, not like that with me, but afraid for something so small as her, guarding dim-minded against a mean world.

When we were fishing and she was out in the river casting, cinched tight around the chest in the too-big waders, the dog paced the bank like a mother.

She loved to fish, and would ease out until the water swirled just below the top of the chest waders, casting to get the weighted nymph far out into the channel that was gouged into the gravelly bed by the river's perpetual, cold underwater clawing. She knew the bottom well, and worked

far out, cheating the river, out to where she could reach the feeding rainbows that jumped out of the slate of the river and glinted quick under the sun.

And while she fished, the dog paced the rocky bank and whined. He paced and whined until it all became too much, and he would start to swim out. The current would sweep him below her and he'd paddle in and run up the shoreline and jump in and do it all again. But the strength of the river and the cold sucked the life from him, and finally he'd fall asleep under a thick-woven overhang of willows, stretched out in the mossy shade like a spring flood washed-up calf.

But the sun would move in on him, and he'd be up again and back at the whining and the walking, dog-nervous with his one love out of reach in the current.

Whitefish boiled close to shore and she ignored them, fishing out, casting far out, laying the fly in natural, out among the solid, noisy raises of the trout. The splashes of the big fish made you look, and I would turn quick from watching the frantic dog quick-step down the bank, or from watching her as she fast-cast to the swirls of the fish, edging out on the gravel, hunting after the slab-sided rainbows. I looked away to other rises, and at the bats coming to feed.

Now, under this summerfallow sky, in the steam and December snow, I thought about summer things. The bronze

shimmer of going-away August sun on the Missouri's blue, and the gulls screaming over tossed-out guts. That was summer. The whip of the fly and that dead smell of the water.

I remember her there. And I thought about her at home on the couch with the dog, and thought about kissing her good-bye and holding her inside the flannel nightgown.

Mike stopped the truck in places and glassed the bends of the creek for sitters. The tank captain, binoculars around his neck, Scotch cap pulled down low.

"Well, we'll go to the spot. The hell with this glassing. I can't see in this shit, anyway."

On up the road, driving through the lightening tunnel of cloud and fog, Mike pulled the truck into the high weeds of the borrow ditch. Here, the creek took a looped, lazy swing out away from the pavement and pushed in against the hills. The dirt banks hunched over it on both sides, hiding our own secret spot. As we jacked the shells into the chambers, I watched the steam come up off the water under the cut. And moving closer, pushing through knee-deep snow in our waders, the frost-covered wild wheat and rosehip bushes, holding on to dangerous life atop the edge, looked to be on fire. The steam huffed up like billows of smoke, rolling off the warm-water stream the way smoke comes off a knot

full of pitch.

"It's really snowing now," Mike said.

"It is. Mary will be happy. She loves the snow."

This was the natural place for ducks to set down, and I always thought it was the natural plan that we should hunt them here. Unseen from the road, or from the top of the rocky reef across the water, this stretch spilled from the strict limits of the banks, onto a little flat, and lost all discipline. The water spread aimless against the reef, eddying careless and stagnant into a slough, nuzzling on the near side against a low, grassy bank and under a thick stand of willows. This was the natural plan and it was our spot alone, the water flat and friendly and noiseless, waiting for this winter company.

We uncoiled the anchor lines with their lead weights from around the bodies of the decoys and set them facing upstream, into the restful current. Across the stream, bayonet reeds stuck up through a skiff of ice, and the cat-tails hung down tired under the weight of a heavy frost.

In the dog hair-thick stand of willows, we tromped down snow and squatted to wait. The snow was blowing and slowly piled up against us as if we were tree trunks. I motioned down to the little drifts at our legs and at the hollows that formed on the lee side of us. We were still, and you felt bad if you had to rub up your ears or your face, for

fear the moving would spook any flyers.

"No ducks flying."

"Not yet. How are your feet?"

"What feet?"

"Are they bad?" he asked.

"No, not too bad. They'd warm up in a hell of a hurry if we brought in some quackers."

"Hit the call just once."

I worked the feeder call and we sat still and were quiet. The day was cold as the tomb, and around us the steam rose up, and the branches of the winter-dead willows and chokeberry all looked like pussy willow under the blanket of frost. Away-up above the glowering clouds, and above the muffled noise of the snow sighing into the creek, we could hear ducks moving.

Mike shook his head down at my feet. He was a worrier. I liked him for that. A big Polack worrier with eyes set way back in his head and a neck like a rutting buck and a big drooping mustache that frosted white in the cold and made him look like one of those pipe-smoking, worried-looking immigrants you see leaning on the rails of the liners in the special edition Life magazines. He was at ease in the frost and the snow, and he snuggled down into the comfortable drift, the rimey willows huddling in close around him. He was at home.

The snow settled on the backs of the dekes, and I watched the current push them side to side, tugging against the anchor lines. I watched them weave back and forth so slow in the current, and the painted heads bob up and down, the sleepy, rolly moving of the dekes.

And then I heard Mike shift suddenly, too noisily, under the hiding thatch of the willows, and he hissed and was up, and I looked to see them coming in. And he was shooting as if it was a war, and I was up and blasting through the steam at the group of Northern mallards that had slipped in under this grim cloud cover and zeroed in on our decoys. They hovered in over the wooden ducks and committed themselves to set down and now it was too late.

Pushed out by the cold and a dim longing to move, they winged south. And those that found this line came into the warm, open sanctuary of the creek, feeding off the bottom-land stubble and the stream's own thick bottom slime.

It was usually teal and mallards we took, vivid and firm from the long, wild trip from Canada. And I never failed to feel just a little giddy when a bunch of birds would sidle in and set their wings, that eye beat when we'd stand to shoot, the birds suspended in that shutter-pose second between landing and lifting off, that second between

their feeling of security and the wild, desperate knowing that the whole thing is wrong. A feeling in the stomach, empty, like the bottom has been sprung. The same feeling, hooking a truly big brown or rainbow on a small stream like this one, knowing it was his wiliness that got him so big, out of place here, a fish for the big water. And seeing his huge side flash, deep in the hole after taking my fly with a mean pass, taking it in the tough, underslung jaw, taking it down, and finally, slowly, coming up for the last time ever, because I had hidden well in the brush and not left a shadow and had laid the fly in there just so.

It was an empty-belly feeling, and when you set him up in the grass, the deep orange and the yellow, the color you saw in the hole, never lasted long, and he was just going white and stiff, eye frozen fast on the sun.

I watched the birds float downstream, stretched out and moving slow with the current, and the ones hit really good had their wings spread on the water in a final, dead glide. Mike hollered to wake up and pick up the floaters, and he chased a cripple upstream around the bend. I short-stepped up the mossy bottom. One big Northern drake hung up on a decoy, curled around the false hen in a last embrace. I held him up, and even in so dim a light, he was beautiful, the speculum blue of the wings, and the head that changes a hundred shades of green. They were beautiful all right, and

it was funny that the females were so drab. The Grey Duck, they called them, and odd that the female would be so plain, when with us, the woman is the beautiful one, the way they dress up so showy like mallard drakes, or an old rooster pheasant, decked out in colors and strutting, painted around the eye.

But that flashy green head was the right lead and it stood out and I always shot for it.

I heard splashing, and Mike came from around the corner of the creek, carrying his shotgun and a long, dead branch. His eyes burned out from under the brim of his cap, and standing in the steam, his eyebrows and mustache frosted, he made a great picture.

"Goddamn it, she went under."

I quit smiling. They would do that. And it seemed like it was usually the female. They would dive under, a wing shattered or bb's deep in the guts, knowing there was nowhere to go, that there was no escaping this ugly predator. They would swim down and grab onto a weed or a branch sticking out from the bank and just drown there. That was a beauty, her wanting to die alone and wild, her mate probably one of the greenheads whose necks I'd twisted and thrown up on the bank. Then sometimes we would jump a bunch and they'd be up, and some falling, shooting for the drakes always, that greenhead lead. Then you'd be gathering the

down birds and hear suddenly the whistle of wings, the shots still hammering in your ears and echoing between the hills. And here would be this lone hen, coming in low, taking one suicidal pass, looking for the mate, wanting to join him, looking down at us as we point up with our barrels, coming in a determined pass one last time.

"Maybe she's just up under the bank," I said.

"I looked all the way to the culvert. She's down dying."

"Well, she's your cripple."

"Well, anyway, she's dead."

"Yes, I guess she is soon."

Mike stared up at the clouds, and the creek sighed with the steady snow settling into it. We picked up the three drakes and set them back under the cover of the willows. I straightened the decoys, and back on the bank, we stomped down the snow and settled in to wait. After a while, Mike worked the call, and we held back the plumes of our breath and listened for the whine and hiss of wings coming in low.

The creek was at ease again--now that the crash of the guns had faded into the steam, and the last downy breast feather had been swept downstream. It wobbled the dekes on their lines, and reflected the fallen sky. And with the heavy snow blowing in, the water made one constant exhale, one steady, drowsy breath in your ear.

"Does she call you Honey really?"

"I told you," he said.

"You know, Mary calls me Sweetheart, which sounds funny to just say it like that. Doesn't it sound funny?"

Mike stared at me long from under the bill of his cap.

"Goddamn it, don't talk now. These duck are moving."

"Well, my feet are okay now. They warmed right up with the ducks."

"Fine," he said.

And as if someone had closed the flue tight, the day closed in around us, with the steam and the squatting sky and the snow. Mike crouched in the dead willows with his shotgun held between his knees and his forehead pressed close against the barrel, looking like one of those animals around the roof-line of the old academy. His brim was bent down over his eyes. He wasn't looking around at all.

"Mike, remember when the four of us went out to Centerville and that hairlip bartender pulled the automatic from under the bar when we wouldn't leave at two? The girls were hot at us that night, hey."

"Sure I remember," he said.

"We'll have to do that one of these days soon. They liked it up 'til then. We'll all do that again."

Mike turned slow and stared at me. He eyed me hard. A wind blew up, and I watched the snow angle hard against the

ice of the slough beyond the creek, and heard it clatter through the reeds. And still, Mike stared over, with those close-set, mean dog-eyes coming at me through the storm.

"Listen to me," he said. "She's gone, Partner. Don't think about it any more. There's nothing to do. It's been long enough now to turn it loose. You got me and your family, and all these ducks to be gunned, and fishing. We've talked and talked. There's nothing you could do, and it's time to get lined out and on with everything."

Finally the snow, full captive of this bitter east-er, sliced through the stand of willows, and I couldn't see the slough, so close across the way. There was only Mike and I in that stand of willows. And so cold--my cheeks felt lacquered over, hard and brittle in the wind, about to crack in this close-in, December icebox. I slowly wiped the snow from the side of my gun, and still, there was Mike eyeing me.

"Yes," I said. "I guess you're right, Partner. I'm sorry."

I guess he was right. He was always smart. And he kept on looking at me, those eyes from way under the brow, two black barrel holes leveled at me through the blizzard.

I turned to watch the creek, and listened to it breathe under the storm. I remembered the branch that rubbed the window. Some short way west, over home, I see her on the

couch behind the glass, there under that leafless elm, under that moon, waiting at home.

Over the din of the snow in the water and the wind through the reeds and the brush, I could hear Mike move in the snow among the willows, maybe now, again, squinting through the steam for flyers.

The day was tight around me and I couldn't feel anything for the cold. But still I loved this hunting ducks, loved when they came in low and flared at the water with that big, white breast flashing on the surface; it was the best damned feeling in the world. But God, I was anxious to get home.

* * *

A LEGACY OF FENCE

A LEGACY OF FENCE

When the bay mare vaulted from the dusty cell of the chute, I stabbed her neck with my irons, lugged with everything on the riggin handle, and tucked my chin tight on my chest. My rowels zinged up her neck, I charged my feet down again, sure of my handhold and the sticky guarantee of rosin. We were flying.

But the squawk of rosined leather was a lie. In the dizzy flurry of chap leather, winter-long mane hair, snort, and slap of spur iron on hide, I felt my hand coming loose, slowly slipping, each tiny give a huge feeling of loss and pounding of heart.

Then I was gone, high in the air without her, snapped from her back and floating slow motion above the slashing hooves of a 21-year old professional bucking horse who had done her job. She planted those feet low in my back and sent me into a beautiful, gymnastic turnabout that drove me into the hard dirt of the Custer County fairgrounds arena. And lying there, covered with earth, feeling some new pain, I watched her move away, still bucking under the ghost of me.

The old sot my father had hired was the kind most everyone in our country got. He'd take his weekly check and ride the bus to town and drink up a hundred in the bad end of town with some other old boozer from some other outfit up the valley. Finally, forgetting to eat, keeping his belly full of well liquor and wine, he lost time, and the Saturday night jag became a five-dayer. He straggled back, phoned drunk-humble from the bus stop, and drank in the bar on credit until my father showed. And feeling responsible like you would for a dog that bit a neighbor, dad paid the tab, gave the blubbering, whining hired man bus fare to town and was done with him, turning his back on the "oh, Jesus, oh Christ I'm sorry, Earl, Earl, I'm sorry, this is the last, I'm all done now, I'm sorry Earl, Jesus." He had hay on the ground, but he was a proud man and was done with him. He had his rules.

When I called from the motel he told me the whole story, and it was his way of asking me to come. So I made the long drive west, the smell of liniment strong in the car, driving toward the blue line of mountains and the blood-dark thunderhead growing like a cancer above them. The Dodge hugged the hot line of asphalt, hissing its tires,

growling its cylinders at the humped and gouged sage ground, shimmering in the heat. I hung on the wheel, rode the engine and thought about the lunges and jumps of a long summer of horses and felt that same tension of huge muscle bunch under me and knot up my stomach. I was dreaming horses and the Dodge was eating up miles.

That evening, I turned the car from the comfort of pavement onto gravel and drove up the valley, passing our neighbors' places, slowing for their animals where the fences were down, prodding balky yearlings with the Dodge's hot chrome.

When he saw the car nose into the yard, he came out of the quonset, lugging a ratchet wrench as big as a cow's hip bone, hand-shading his eyes from a crescent of sun.

I was his son, all right. I saw me in his lanky, heavy-boned body, in the arc of his legs where the bellies of horses had worked outward at the leg bones for too many years, molding them out like you train a vine to a trellis. And he must have seen that little bit of him in me, just a silhouette in the sun, showing his shape, and he smiled, wiping sweat from his neck. When he made out my face, though, squinting against the glare, he lost the grin. He saw her there, and like always, it took the enthusiasm out of him. Hard-eyeing the lines of my face under the sun's last light, he asked after her, listening, studying the

ground. And then, hand on his neck, wiping petroleum-based sweat, he pointed with his elbow to the corral.

"That goat is as much a wife as she was," he said, and went on with his damn her, goddamn her, sweat Christ almighty damn her, long litany of bitter, pent-up, slow-dying love of my mother, his grease-blackened knuckles tight around the handle of the wrench.

I'd long ago pieced together his picture of how his life ought to have been, working backward in time, the whole perfect line of it ending with being put in the ground up on the pishkun above the house, in the best grass on the place, where buffalo had pounded over the edge a hundred years ago. We'd stood up there and he'd pointed out over his piece of ground, rolling out away from under the butte and down to the banks of the Sun. Under the bluff, white knobs of bones poked up from the dirt like they'd finally festered out. He saw his pretty wife crying on my shoulder, saw me sharpening sickle blades and mowing his good hay. And from up on the jump, he saw miles of new fence, pointing out how it would finally run, etching a perfect line with perfect angles around his own chunk of God's country.

But his thought-out life's scheme wasn't working. He was gray but nowhere close to dying, hay had been poor for years, posts were rotting in the ground, and that pretty woman had just one day hidden his pick-up keys, packed the

back seat of a Mercury sedan tight with clothes, face creams and fast-wrapped bowls of Waterford crystal, and drove out.

I took it all in, watching the ground and the grip on the wrench, until finally he had it out of him. He walked back to the quonset shed and I drove down among the cows and calves, and tested the weight of bales and the tightness of the strings.

He made up at supper, his way, putting the biggest piece of bloody meat on my plate, piling beans and potatoes enough for three men. He poured coffee, putting in the cream and sugar for me. And after we pushed back our chairs, he took out cold beers and popped them and everything was all right.

From the porch, we listened to the radio crackle out Merle Haggard's lament over a sky with no blue, and heard the larks calling across the timothy. Mosquitos popped into the electric bug light, and Dad snored on the hanging swing. When the moon came pushing up above the line of the far-off Highwoods, I woke him up to go in. He got up without a word and I heard his boots thudding on the floor and heard him open the refrigerator door for light to his room. I heard the thump of his boots and the clank of his buckle when his jeans hit the floor, and heard the squawk of the bed springs as he laid out.

I hated that refrigerator business. He knew I'd get up

to close it. He'd done it for twenty years. I'd rattle the door, knocking together the bottles of ketchup and steak sauce. But above the racket I could hear his gurgling snore. This was part of taking me back.

So we put up hay: tons of timothy and alfalfa and good wild hay from close to the river--brambly, nettly grass that cattle would crave as delicacy in the middle of a long winter. And except for discussing the placement of stacks and polite "pass this, pass that" at summer and lunch, we didn't talk, and seldom got closer than the eight-foot tines of the buck rake. As he wheeled around each field scooping bales, I watched the sun glint off the plungers of the hydraulics and wondered when he'd pop. From the tops of stacks, I'd stare east, beyond our fences, and think about horses I was missing and about long stretches of highway that I'd always liked to drive. I'd go over them in my head, thinking about the Dodge making time and kicking into passing gear, lusting for speed.

When the last cut of hay was up, we left the equipment right there in the field where the last bale had been stacked and set to building fence. In his life that knew only work, this was his passion: perfect lines of cedar posts and tight wire. He grinned at me though the blue plume of diesel as he sat the dinosaur Minneapolis-Moline tricycle tractor, jerking the hand throttle, revving the

engine. He was happy building fence, augering or barring holes in the hard ground. He heaved the bar like he was angry at the earth, as if shale ground under dirt was earth's flexed muscle, stubborn against his fence. He drove the spud bar into the maw, sending sparks and chips of shale into his face, and with each throw, a fat drop of sweat rolled from his nose onto his chest.

With a strand of wire tied around the bucket of the tractor, he pulled the wires tight. I ran the length stapling wire to post as fast as I could, while he clambered down from the MM and tested the tightness like he was tuning a fiddle string.

He loved that five-wire fence, "Not like these cattle," he said, "that'll all be one day in some freezer or belly leather for some shoe. These'll be here when I'm not." These were his monuments--five silvery wires strung tight, going off at right angles to the river, five wires of American steel and nature's own cedar to be remembered by.

Seeing this part of his picture going up, that picture from up on the buffalo jump, he got to envisioning the rest of it too. I knew he would. I expected it maybe during the haying, but he'd held onto it. And now it was this passion of the fencing that set him off.

His second son had looked like him, dark face and hair, and as he figured he'd given me over to my mother, this one

would be his.

"He was a beautiful boy, by Christ, full head of black hair already, wrapped in that blanket, just as clean as a rock and smiling at me, looking at me smiling like he knew me already," all this while he tamped sod tight around the base of a post, sweating, tamping, accusing, visioning this other son while he worked at putting up a legacy of fence.

The boy had been still-born, and those were glazed eyes that had stared out at him, not showing or knowing anything, just a dead stare, the smile a red-faced grimace over something gone wrong in the black hazard of the womb. She'd had something wrapped or twisted wrong up inside her from after the first time she went through it.

After that, nothing was quite right around the house. A year later, mother gunned the Merc out of the yard without a look back. She left me there to fight the memory of that other son, that brother, that matured to beauty in my father's head, growing like a tumor every day she was gone. And in every one of my failures growing up there, I saw him hating that part of her in me he saw in the color of my hair, the thin nose and the look of the eye. He was disgusted to see her things in my room: the rocking chair, little doilies on the table, pictures of horses she'd cut from magazines for me.

The day she'd told me about the brother, I went up to

the catch-pond above the house. It sat up among the strips, and from far away up on the buffalo jump, it looked like the eye of a huge striped fish. I sat there and watched the clouds change in the green reflection of the water. On the fence around the pond that kept the cattle out, was the pecked-out shell of some calf that didn't make it. Dad had thrown it up on the wires for the birds to take care of. And after a year, only a flap of hide was left, the black hole sockets of the eyes gazing out. All the magpies and crows and goshawks in the country had their fill, and it was just a hunk of red, hereford leather crackling in the breeze.

So we worked at putting up new, straight fence and he talked about the beauty of a dead son and about my mother and about all women, and he explained the world in terms of cattle: everything was a matter of breeding--good, selective breeding and the lack of it in this goddamned, wasting-away society, and all the culls are out there breeding while good men are tending the place. All this between the lunging of the blade of the bar, the pounding of the ground around the posts, and the jumping onto the seat of the Minneapolis-Moline tractor, backing slowly up to take the slack out of a strand of wire.

He believed, too, that old prize-fighter notion about meat for strength, so every night we ate slabs of meat, done

just enough so they'd stay down. We sat on the porch, listening to the creak of the swing, the rabbits moving under the house, and the spooky hiss of the nighthawk's wings, diving through the dusk for moths.

One night, while he snored on the swing, I got to looking at the boots he was wearing and thought about the pair of red calfskins he got once in trade for a horse. He'd gotten me a sad-eyed, powerful stud when I was twelve. The hired man from the neighbor's place said he must have been got cheap, because he'd drug a man to death somewhere over by the Snowies, drug him across the top of a butte for miles. They finally caught up with him drinking long and nervous from a spring, the man's body lying in the stream, the blood swirling around and the flies starting to find him.

But Old Stubber was a gentle old pet. I groomed him every day, standing on a box, running the curry comb slowly down his back from the high withers to the huge flanks, sending up hair and dust that hung in the air. Old Stubber would close his eyes and shift his big-bellied weight to three legs and go off to sleep. But I never rode him, and the old man traded him to some saddlemaker for a pair of red calfskin boots, and for the bragging rights of getting those beautiful, dress-up boots for a sorry sonofabitch barrel-bellied stud horse that liked to kill people.

When he was gone, I started to think about all the places I could have ridden him: those high bluffs south of the pishkun where the spring bubbled out of the sandstone and shaley dirt. I thought about resting there in the mint, stretched out in the cold shade of the rocks while the sun cooked the ground just out of reach. I thought how we could have stalked antelope on the hill. I'd lay low on Stubber's back and guide him up on the herd, fooling them into thinking he was some kind of fat kin, then jumping up and seeing their rumps flare white, hearing the grass hiss against their legs as they hit their flat-out getaway.

I sat there in the dark regretting a horse trade made ten years ago and listening to my father blow in his sleep. I could see stretches of new fence lit under the moon. I remembered trying to curry out the dark markings on the horse's belly that I'd thought were stains of the man's blood. I remembered Stubber's nice, easy gait and good withers. But I never rode him once and he took him away.

The next day. Sunday, I went into town, bought groceries, and hung around the Black Diamond. It was nearly dark when I got on the road home, driving slowly, sipping a beer and checking the shape of the neighbor's cows.

All the lights were off in the house, and I stalked quietly through the hallways and rooms until I found him,

asleep in my room, in the rocker my mother had rocked me in. His head lay back against the doilies she'd made for me, his white hair tossled over his forehead. His big, cracked hands were palm-up in his lap--in that room full of memories, he'd given up to her.

I didn't wake him, but sat in the kitchen, drinking a beer at the table. I was trying to balance three empties when he came slowly out. In the neon light from the stove, his face showed the disgust of a man who'd been caught crying over a horse or a dog. He brushed past me, swung open the ice-box door, and went into his room. I followed him with sounds, heard the window sash slide up, heard his wicker-bottom chair creak under his weight. I knew he was seeing her again, against all trying.

I left my mother's husband like this the next day: pacing, head down, toward the river, pacing off fifteen perfect feet between future posts, and scratching a mark in the dirt with the heel of his boot. Beyond him, cattle were curious-shaped in the heat waves. I drove the Dodge to the county road and stopped to look back. He was pacing and scratching, pacing evenly and scratching toward another tight, straight monument that would never hold fat cattle.

I went to her mostly because she was shy and liked my face. It wasn't a great face, but she was shy and it was

her first face. Sometimes, lying on the bed, she'd feel under the skin and imagine what our skulls were like, because she'd read somewhere about Neanderthal and Peking Man. She figured I was Neanderthal. I liked her face, but it was too small and fragile to be any caveman throwback.

I stayed with her at her father's place. I knew him only from a photograph of a man with a horse on the mantlepiece. In the picture, the horse stood with its head behind the man, but she said it was a beautiful horse, with a small head and a star low down on the nose. Sitting in the living room, in an old, overstuffed chair, I tried to imagine how it had been: lifting the hot wire, feeling the jolt of volts that burned clean through. The horse had been killed outright, the same handsome bay in the picture, twenty thousand volts hunting the ground through its veins, its big heart exploding in its chest. When the hired man arrived, her father was unsaddling his mount--some kind of old cowboy reflex, as he was dead, falling with the Hamley saddle under him, the soles of his boots blow off--leather, skin, and horsehide all smoldering away in the cheatgrass.

I'd feel a tingle down in my stomach, as if the ghost of that electricity still charged the air around the mantlepiece.

Most of the place had been sold then, but she lived on a good pension and insurance money, and I stayed on and got

lazy. I rode her horses on the cooler days. They'd gotten lazy and lathered up within a quarter mile, heaving out their fat sides for air. It could have been a good life: the horses and her cooking, her child's face and long-limbed horsewoman's body in bed. Some mornings before she woke up, I'd stand on the porch and watch the horses graze into a corner, then walk down, hiding the bridle behind my back and catch the gray. Unridden and fat, the gelding was reluctant to carry any weight, and would usually bog his head with the reins and kick out his hind legs in a fat-bellied imitation of a buck. I'd hook my heels deep in his sides, laughing out there by myself in the shallow, brushy coulees with the sun coming up over open country, the smell of horses in my nostrils.

And back at her house, she'd have breakfast waiting, and good coffee made with the egg in the grounds. She was happy to have me there to ride her spoiled bunch of horses, mend a little fence or toy with old appliances, sit on the porch with her after supper. I was trying hard to belong there.

Her horses were lazy and became cagey, and soon wouldn't come to me or stand in the corners of fence. They'd take off in a mane-throwing canter if they heard the faintest jingle of a bridle's buckle. It got to be too much work to even catch a horse to ride.

So I started to sit on the porch all day and all night and drink. She tried to get me to do a few little things, but I sat in a chair under the eaves of the old house, watching the horses and trying to get something good out of a bottle of gin.

One night we sat, each sipping a drink, watching the bats hunt in the last of the light, and I tried to tell her how it was. I told her how good it was and how it felt, how that first jump, the horse throws my legs back, and charging back, I get hold of the bulge of shoulder before her front feet crash the ground, and my hand is tight still in the riggin, and I'm jerking my feet up, dragging my rowels up her neck, my chaps slapping my face, and I'm dragging them up and throwing them down and the air is flying. I tell her how it feels, hanging on, hanging in the air, and she's snapping my head, my legs still working up and out, up and out and down like trying to keep the both of us in the air, against all gravity, like flying. I tell her how I feel when I'm off on the ground after, watching her still buck across the dirt and picturing myself on her, thinking, "I just rode that son of a bitch."

I explain to her what's it's like when I can't do it. I tell her about long stretches of highway that I love and tell her sometimes I think the Dodge is alive and hits a stride like a good horse will do. She tries to talk, and I

tell her about a room in Miles that I tore apart. I just tore it apart and slept under an upturned couch with all the blankets from the sterile bed. I made my own little dark cave against the neon coming from the motel sign and slept there. And I told her about Old Stubber draggin that hired man's head across the rocks on the bluff, and about that stretch of road above Martinsdale where gophers die because they're out on the oil cannibalizing their friends. And there was that girl in Graf that had her baby in the toilet and her dad put it in a shoe box and drove it to town with a rock on top to keep the lid on, took it to the sheriff and said, "I found it." They said it had been alive, drown in the bowl, struggled around in the cord and placenta and died in the pot. And she asked me to stop it, to please stop it, but I'd been drinking a long time and kept on about how it probably tossed around in the water, wanting like any bawling calf or litter runt to live. And she started to cry, while I held onto the bottle and the arms of the chair, trying to hear above the sobbing the bats cutting the air and the horses grinding grass.

With the breeze just right, I could smell the river from there on the porch and asked if she could, too. I drank from the bottle of English gin and sang to her from a song my mother had taught me: "Down by the seashore, sifting sand, down by the seashore, Mary Ann." I was trying

to remember more and she went in. I slept there on the porch, hearing the horses blow in the dark across from me.

From my chair in the morning, I saw her and the gray gelding loping into a wide coulee that led down to the river. She was riding bareback. She kicked the gray for a quarter mile, then reined up and slipped out of sight into the cottonwoods along the river.

Inside, there was no coffee made. It was dark enough that the stove's pilot light still made shadows on the ceiling. I walked past the picture of her father and the headless horse to our room. I put my few things in a bag. I thought about her there on the bed, smiling, her hair spread out in a red fan. I thought about walking down to the horses again, and I thought about leaving her a note. I thought about telling her I would be back.

I drove east on the comfort of a straight highway, past one-bar towns that nuzzled to the asphalt for support--drove for distance and to blow the carbon from the Dodge. It had sat still for a month, gathering filth from the dusty, idle ranch-yard. I took a room in one dying little town and left at dawn, walking past the night manager who slept with his face on a newspaper. I ate breakfast and we drove out.

In the evening, I pulled off the pavement onto a gravel

road to piss and drink a beer, and I watched a crippled horse in a pasture bordering the highway. It hobbled around, feeding without interest, nuzzling another horse that kept it company. They began to watch a tractor making rounds through the stubble, trailing twenty feet of discs. And while our eyes were on him, the driver began to slow at the corners, riding the clutch and watching me on the road. I drove down the hill and stopped near the in-road of the place the man riding the John Deere belonged to.

It was an hour before he came. I watched birds pick in his garbage dump, and followed his fences with my eyes. They skewed along the edges of coulees and ridges, skirted around bog holes and old well holes. There were four-wire and pig-wire fences, and some wires hung to the ground. Two crude-skinned cow hides covered the cattleguard, and a polled cow skull hung on a gate post, a bleached socket stuffed tight by a wren and eyeing me.

I sat on the car until he came, and we went through it all: we talked tractors and cattle, and he asked after people over in my country, groping around for mutual acquaintances. He was old and forgot names, but described the locations of the places these folks lived on. And if I wanted work, he said, I'd have to cook, because the old woman had passed away. So we went in and I cooked some pieces of meat, boiled potatoes, made a milk gravy and we

ate. It was like a test.

We took turns riding the Deere, long hours of turning the ground over. We went round and round two huge fields. Hundreds of gulls, scavenging the worms we turned up, lit behind us, like a white wake.

At night, after we ate, we sat on his screened-in porch and sipped clear whiskey made on the reservation. After a tall water glass full, he would talk about his wife, and how he loved her. His memory was bad, so he told me the same story many times: there was a dance hall by the river where they'd danced together for years. The first time they did it laying on his slicker in the brush by the water. The moon was full, he said, and I could see them there--white and mottled by the shadows of the brush, hearing the breathy saxophone from the hall, the rush of the stream, the rustling of animals in the growth--scared but intent on this dangerous thing. When I'd look at him, though, that withered, deep-cracked face, staring at something far away in the dusk, the whole picture went away, and there was only the rotting piles of twenty years of garbage next to the house, fallen-down fences, and the brittle hides of cows tossed over a cattleguard. So when he spoke of her, I stared out over the pasture where the river must be and imagined. The first night after the first story, he took me to the corner of the house, pointed to a hill in back and

said she was there.

The bunk house had long ago been given over to storage, so I slept among sacks of old woman's clothing, stacks of books and shoe boxes full of letters. The walls were hung with rolls of old wire and hand sickles of all sizes. When the wind blew, the wire and sickles rattled together like chimes.

On a Sunday, above the ringing of the sickles, I heard a long, low whistle. I dressed, and standing outside my weathered little house, I saw the old man saddle his horse, put a slicker on, and ride out to the north. The crippled horse leaned far over the fence and watched him disappear among the hills. It kept gazing after him, as if it could still see, as if it expected him to turn back and change mounts. The ground rose to the north, and soon I could see him riding again, riding and stopping, dismounting and standing. I watched until he was too far to see. The cripple stared after him, and I walked down and scratched her in the soft spot between her lower jaw bones.

The fences followed the contours of the ground, so the line the old man rode was his own. I walked the worn pathway that led north, sending up puffs of dust with every step, and came to where he had first stopped. Nosing out of the grass was the original quarter-section stone, a large '¼' chiselled into its north face. And all around it were

the tracks of a milling horse and the stomped out butts of roll-yer-own smokes. I kept on along the worn trail, across the rocky ground, through a deep-cut wash for half a mile and came to a section stone, four slashes carved into the north face, one on the east, the entire stone covered over with lichen, the ground trying to reclaim its own. All around the corner, the earth was worn and dusty, and butts of smokes were twisted out by a boot heel.

I walked back along this line and past the lame, patient mare. She grazed and looked up often. I took a chew and climbed up to the hill where the old man's wife was buried. The wires around the plot were tight and the posts were set solid in the dirt. Horse hairs hung from the barbs like moss. The grass inside was trimmed down, and plastic carnations hung from a stone that read, 'Loving Wife.' There was another stone with the man's name, Christian Finney, and the date of birth, chiselled into the granite. I knew he was a patient man and could build good fence when he wanted to.

That evening, I waited on the porch for him. When I saw him, coming on a line from the west, bent over in the saddle as if asleep, I got up and started supper. He curried out his horse, came in and ate without speaking. He got up and went to the porch and started talking before I even sat down next to him.

"In nineteen hundred and thirty-two it was, I took two hundred fifty head of lambs and ewes up there by that deep wash-out north of here and made a quick little holding pen and started cutting the throats of all them sheep and tossing them over into the wash. I brought up every knife in the house, and the missus kept sharpening them up as I was cutting the throats of them sheep and tossing them over until all the ground and me and the wife was blood and the coulee was a pile of all my ten years of sheep and gurgling lambs that hadn't even weaned. Those were some bad old times. I couldn't even afford no ammunition for my rifle, either, as that would have been a cleaner way of doing it."

He told me he knew the look of the hills on the place from every angle, how they looked under the sun at every hour of the day, every season. He knew where the sage hens liked to feed and where the deer would come to water. He knew every bog hole and every fence post that was original.

He said he saw me up there, and she was a beautiful woman, by God.

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THE BOHUNK'S FUNERAL

THE BOHUNK'S FUNERAL

When the grim, rough Filipino nurse came in to change the dressing on his ear, Jack Handy was awake from the hiss of the new, hard, November snow against the window. His room was two-toned yellowwhite, yellow half way up like a high-water line, as if some great yellow bile flood had swept through. Jack was embarrassed by the stain his ear had left on the pillowcase, and as the nurse tugged at the bandage, he was quiet and looked away from her and past her wide hips and the white plastic curtain around his bed. In the other bed, he saw the old man, asleep under a bare light, with his mouth open and toothless, his head cocked toward the door. There was a picture on the small chest of drawers between their beds, an oak framed portrait of a young woman in a wide-shouldered tweed jacket. Jack knew it was an old picture because of the dark lipstick she wore and the shoulder-length hair cut just so and turned under, and the broad, padded-shouldered jacket. The name signed angling across the corner was an old name, too--Evelyn. He had the idea she was dead.

The picture looked at Jack, and when the nurse hustled out, he turned it back around to face the white-headed old

man, tucked in neat under the sheets. And lying on his side, Jack slipped off to sleep, listening to the comfortable pulse thrum in his good ear pressed to the pillow. He slept like the dead and didn't dream, only drifted back and back and down, moving away under the weight of absolute tiredness. He drifted far away and down, but came flying up out of it, jerked back, and came suddenly awake, confused and heavy-lidded. He pulled back the curtain from around his high bed enough to see the old man and the picture that faced him. The light was on above the other bed, and it left a line of shadows under the man's brows, his broad nose, his heavy lips and square, thrust-out chin. The skin was pulled tight across the bone. His chest was flat under the sheet and very small for the size of the head, and Jack saw that the man's feet stuck out from under the sheets. The big toes pointed down, toward the window and the darkening day, and his feet looked blue and cold. Jack was embarrassed for him, and thought it must be uncomfortable. He pressed the button on the cord to call the nurse.

Soon, a nun came in smiling and pulled the sheet down and tucked it in under the old, wide feet. She began then to put her ear to the man's nose and chest. She felt his neck and his wrist, and went out quickly, and Jack looked from the portrait to the man's shallow, little chest and to the door. The young nun, like a ghost in her white, flowing

habit, returned with two nurses, and the older nurse put her stethoscope to the chest. This all seemed familiar to her, and she was very military in her manner. She went to the man's feet and felt them beneath the covers and said, "call an orderly to get him out."

Jack stayed quiet behind the curtain. None of them had given him a look. He had pushed the button on the cord. The nurses went out, and the nun was uneasy in the room with the frail, cold, thick-lipped dead man. She pulled the sheet from under his arms gently over his face, the crisp linen making a static sound as it passed over the growth of his whiskers. She went out quickly, and did not bother to cover again the splayed, cold-looking feet that lay wide-spread and detached below the linen.

Jack Handy studied the ceiling and began to think about his uncle, and although it had all been a neat package, the death and burial, it must have all started like this. But he could not really see it. He thought about what had awakened him, but remembered now only the fast click, click, click of the heels of the nun's smart black pumps as she short-stepped down the hall to the nurse's station. There hadn't been any reason to hurry.

The river smell had come up to him like the breath of a living thing: the smell of willows, farmland silt, rotting

fish, and rotting cottonwoods fallen into the water. Jack Handy stood on the bank and looked up and down at what the river had vomited up for the winter: the hollow shells of carp, planed wood and gnarled driftwood and an even line of slime.

He watched the ducks out on the river and wondered if they did this for fun: the gangs of big, northern mallards and the tight-packed groups of teal, floating downstream on the thin, crystal plates of ice, and then, when it started into a riffle and finally where the water peeled up and back over rocks, breaking up, the ducks lifted off in a string and searched upstream for another big piece of ice.

Jack watched and even though they were far out in the slate of the river, he could tell they floated on the ice. They sat puffed and sleepy, too far out of the water to be swimmers. They would fly up and catch a chunk of ice and ride it down.

Sitting on the rocky bank, he pulled up his collar on the windy side and thought about Whelan. They would jog down to the flour mill, the two of them, almost every morning in the summer, and stand with their backs to the white, tall storage bins that rose up from the cliff above the river and watch the big summer cumulus boil overhead and feel the towers pitching over on top of them. You had to believe that it was the towers moving, and not the big

Canada wind moving the clouds far up there for it to work. They stood there looking up and the bins swayed over them. Then they would bring some of the other guys down to try it, the pack of them trotting gangly like coyotes on the hunt, ragged-kneed and punky. They would stand there, heels, butts, shoulder blades and heads pressed up against the wheat bins, and pretty quick would be calling 'bullshit' and go off pitching rocks at the birds that flocked in for the spilled grain: the sparrows going up first, and then the tamer pigeons whirling up with the slap of their wings echoing loud between the towers and the boxcars. They left Jack and Whelan smiling at each other.

The two of them stared up at the high weather sweeping by and felt dizzy. That's what it did to you. They felt funny to be standing there grinning and any time the white towers, swaying too much, could come toppling down on them: the cinder ground moving and the towers, cool against their backs, moving, and the Montana, blue sky frozen still under the sun.

They would break away and run together across the spilled wheat and across the rails and jump and bounce into the barely moving, open freight cars and ride them just to ride them the two or three miles out to the GN switchyard. They would bum there in the tall weeds and watch the gophers mine in under the ties, and then run when they spotted a

slow freight or gondola easing out of the yard toward the mill and get on, bellying up onto the metal floor of a car or catching the ladder. Jack and Whelan were happy to go back and forth from the mill to the switchyard, watching the men yanking the switches and listening to the boom and crash of the coupling and uncoupling, and yelling above the noise. But they always watched the cars that lunged out the other direction, being jerked and pulled to the Hi-Line, making that ugly trip up across the strips, climbing the low benches, skirting the Bear Paws and pushing into the windy town of Havre. The rails hugged the big, lazy curves of the Missouri, nuzzling in against the river like it was some cold mother, moving away to the tops of the bluffs only when the breaks and coulees came down to the water's edge and left no room for the shaley dikes of the tracks. It seemed to Jack to be the only real route south to north--the river, the rails, and now in November, the winding, sure way of the flights of the geese and ducks.

In the wind, hunched on the rocks, Jack watched the blue and green-winged teal hitchhiking between the willowed islands of the Missouri on the ice from the early winter blow. Jack guessed it was a smart thing: they could ride along and not have to swim and not have to sit wary on the bank, nervous about river bobcats or foxes come from mousing the stubble near the water, or about men sneaking through

the willows and young cottonwoods, quiet and low to not show silhouettes until, bang, there they are on top of you. And you jump out of the mud and water and it's all feathers from the other wings slapping and you climb hard away and up. No. This way they didn't have to worry, out there in the middle of the river. Jack felt close to them and wanted to think it was a fun thing. He wanted to believe that there was a life more than the flying from North to South and South to North and looking for holes in the ice, or watching mates fall from beside you, head under wing, dead into the water. He wanted to think that the low throat sounds were some kind of laughing, and that the big groups of ducks were having fun like a bunch of kids, out there under the ugly, grey sky with snow in it and the river quick turning solid.

Up the river from where Jack sat and watched, a huge pump snaked out into the current between two islands. It was held in place there in the steady pull by a long line of wooden palettes lashed together with stout sisal rope. The channel had gotten too shallow for the power boats to make it through, and the pump chugged up the guts of the river it lay over, and pushed it through a pipe to the bank. Jack searched after the flocks of mallards, widgeons, and waspish teal as they winged over, and group after group passed over the pump. He wanted to see the bellies of the ducks as they passed over. From the bank, catching the late glints of the

sun to the west, they looked fluorescent.

Jack walked the bank above the line of moss, and gulls flushed screaming ahead of him, trying to work the wash-up for snails. The pumpline and the palettes were moored to the rocks, and Jack humped over and straddled the pipe and eased out above the water. The palettes tipped from side to side as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. He thought of walking the spinning tunnel at the county fair, with the carnies shrieking from each end to scare you. It was like that: the palettes raising up when he lifted a foot on one side, tipping into the cold Missouri's water under his weight on the other. His boots were soaked through when he reached the pump, but it was mounted well out of the water and the platform was dry. The pump droned on and Jack warmed his feet against the engine block. The drone of the pump and the river lapping against the platform made him comfortable. He lay down on the lee side of the pump, and soon the birds came over. He was perfectly still. Some came over in a long string, and some pushed into the sun in fluid V's. Jack remembered his uncle Bill telling him about hunting ducks and geese, and that he would never shoot if he couldn't make out the feet of the birds as they flew over. That's how you got the range on them. Jack squinted after the ducks going over. They were so close he could see their eyes. With the sun off the water, Jack could see the eyes

of the big drake mallards. Their green heads changed to blue and purple in the last rays of the dying sun. And the teal wings changed, too, like an onyx ring.

Somewhere off on the bank, someone shut off the pump, and above the lapping of the river against the wood, Jack heard the sough and whistle of the wings. With the pump shut off, Jack's body tingled, the drone and vibration gone. It was the feeling his feet had after roller skating around the neighborhood on the cement in his steel-wheeled skates, years before. Now it was his whole body, tingling and prickly. Lying there, the lap of the water, the sudden quiet, the hiss of the wings and the low, throat sounds of the low flying ducks, Jack felt comfortable. I could sleep here, he thought, right here on the river.

Soon, the sun was so low that the birds lost their glow, and Jack could hear, somewhere above the islands, a big group settling in for the night, hitting the water with the sound of a surf. The wind stung his face when he stood up and began to straddle the pipe back to shore. The temperature had dropped with the wind, and the water that he had splashed up going out had frozen on the palettes. He humped over the heavy pipe, holding his knees in over it, and when someone yelled from the bank, Jack looked up quick and slipped on the iced slats of the palette. His feet went up and he went in hard, hitting the side of his head and

scraping his ear on the wood. The water was cold, and already deep from the long days of work by the pump. And the shock of the cold and the sharp pain in his head and the weight of his clothes kept Jack sinking and moving down with the current. He drifted through the silty water, suspended and feeling weightless, and there was the dull bumble of the river in his ears, and a hissing, as though he could hear still the ducks passing low over the water. It was strange and comfortable: the river cradled him. Jack stared up at the surface as the current tugged him slowly downstream. The final rays of the early winter sun filtered down, and he thought of the sun burning through the grey, July storm clouds and that Whelan said it looked like God. It was like looking through a dime store kaleidoscope. He was as comfortable now as on the platform: the burr, the tingle, the hiss of the wings, and above the voice of the river, he began to hear his uncle Bill talk about the goose hunt, and heard him whispering, "get down, be still, they're coming in," and then heard him crying, "Jack, Jack, Mr. Jack McJack." But there was a desperation in the voice that he had never heard before. His heels drug along through the silt of the bottom. His head throbbed loud, and Jack struggled in the water, churning up to where he could hear better his uncle up there where the ducks swooped in close to the surface. He fought the river and its moan and its

embrace, fought to get above the voice of the water to hear his uncle call.

He remembered the struggling to hear and the deep, loud, insistent voice of the river, and remembered a hand on his ear and someone sucking at his mouth.

From those dark mornings at Sts. Cyril and Methodius, as a senior acolyte, Jack Handy had developed the habit of talking in Latin from the Mass, saying "lavabo" softly to himself as he washed his hands, and then, "Dominus Vobiscum." There were many mornings he served the Mass before light, not in the church, but in the rectory, that odd service performed for no one, with only the priest, the altar boys, God and Brother Martin. The good brother had fought the Germans and was a changed man. He was slow and sleepy and liked to massage the boys necks before Mass, as though he were loosening up a prizefighter. He usually slept through the early rectory service, chin on his chest in the last very dark pew of the chapel, only the white of his hands showing him in the darkness, and the scant light flashing off the beads bound at his waist and clenched between his fingers. The air in the room was always warm as breath, in every season.

Jack remembered the Latin words from those mornings

when it was too dark to see outside, when he would listen hard to the words. The priest cradled the chalice in his lower fingers, leaving the two forefingers and the thumbs to be cleansed by the water and the wine that the altar boys poured over them. As they poured from the cruets, he uttered the words, "lavabo" for the water, and "lavabo" for the wine, and then lifted his fingers just slightly to show, "enough."

When it was warm and dark like this, with the thrum of the wind outside the dark panes of stained glass, Jack thought of the chapel as a belly. Across the street was Sts. Cyril and Methodius, granite and square. It was the head. And the long ill-lit hallway from the street ran straight like a throat to the blacktiled, mahogany chapel set deep within the priests' home. The rectory was a dark, silent hole cut off from the world. The doors to the priests' quarters were never opened when Jack or the other acolytes came to serve. Each door in the long hall had a brass name card holder beneath a crucifix, and Jack had memorized the names on the cards and recited them to himself like the Latin: Eliot, Caspar, Campo, Lyman.

For as long as any of the boys could remember, or any of their older brothers who had served could remember, an ancient woman came in to prepare the meals and apparently clean the fathers' rooms. The talk was that she was not

paid wages, but instead was given the gift of eternal salvation for her services. She was a very holy woman, and held and hoarded all the secrets of the rectory. She never smiled, and Jack thought it was not good to smile in the rectory. Only the brother ever smiled there, and he was not quite right. It was not wise to smile in the rectory, here where the Masses were not celebration for the parishoners, but only a dark, sweet-smelling, lonesome ritual. Jack thought of the chapel as a belly, and very early in the morning, kneeling there with only the candlelight and a small bulb burning above the altar of the Blessed Virgin, he thought of being swallowed up here, swallowed up to stay forever, like poor shellshocked Brother Martin and Eliot, Caspar, Campo, Lyman.

After the hospital, his first Mass back, Jack served in the rectory with Mike Whelan. Their joke was that any priest who drained his cruet of wine was an alcoholic.

"Jezuz. Did you see him today? The whole sonofabitch."

"Yes, Jezuz," Jack said.

"I heard my dad telling Jim Kevala anybody drinks in the morning is some kind of alchie."

"I don't know."

"Ah, he's boozy," Whelan said, and then, "Let's try it."

"Hey, shit. Is the brother gone?"

"He's probably sleeping in the confessional, the old stiff. Get the jug."

The black stained cabinet for the wine and hosts was kept open until after the eight o'clock Mass across the street at the church. The jug was heavy. The wine was the color of gasoline.

Whelan said, "Get a glass," and then, when Jack poured, "Hey, this tastes like shit. He must be a boozer to like this shit. A priest and everything."

"Shit, somebody's coming. Dump the glass."

"What? Who's coming?"

"It must be the brother. Dump it for Christ's sake."

Jack smelled the wine in the sink, and thought about the taste of mortal sin, and thought about the feeling he got in his stomach, like it was full to the top with BB shot, when he went into the confessional. He thought about telling Father Lyman, the huge, red-faced Mick from Cork, about the wine in the confessional, and just the thinking gave him the feeling.

"Wash your mouth out, Mike."

That Tuesday was a good day. Tuesday was the day they were saying a funeral for someone at Sts. Cyril and

Methodius. It would not be as good as a wedding, when everyone was happy and drunk and handing out cash. But at these funerals, someone always gave Brother Martin a little something for the boys. Jack was an acolyte with seniority, and on Tuesday would serve the funeral of Stanley Supor.

Stanley Supor was from the Gulch and was a tough man. He was the toughest man in Stockett, Sand Coulee, Number 7 and the City, and he was dead now from too much whiskey, with a liver white as the floor of a chicken coop. He was a tough man and now all the Bohunks from the Gulch, and all the tough Irishmen and Polacks and Italians from around the Gulch and from around town and from the Hi-Line were here, uncomfortable in their brown and black old-country-looking suits. They stood awkwardly bunched in the back of the church, strong with resolve to cut back on the booze, and Stanley Supor was in the box between the carved and polished mahogany pews, rolled out on the new-waxed floor. It was, for them, more a tribute to the reputation of the man than to the man himself. A big Mick whose face had been split open by Stanley Supor's blinding right hand and laid out on the hood of a Dodge in a Black Eagle back lot, stood with the rest. He was not sad, but only respectful. His hands, dangling down in front of him, lined up with the thick,

white, scrubbed hands of a dozen tough men, who stood in the back of the church and away from Stanley Supor's family of Slovenians and other Bohunk in-laws from Number 7.

As Jack stood in the vestibule, just inside the big double doors of the church, wearing the black cassock and white surplice of the funeral, he turned his head to the side and saw first the line of meaty hands. They looked like fish hung to dry. Father Eliot started up the aisle in a slow, reverent cadence, Jack and Mike Whelan, senior acolytes, following close. Jack kept his eyes down now, and saw the too-short trousers and brown wing tips and the bottoms of the dark car coats of the women. Puddles formed under the polished shoes and rubbers from the melting snow, and the waxed floor was wet from the double doors on up to the rows adjacent to the casket of dead Stanley Supor, water setting in the aisle like mercury.

Moving slowly up the aisle in the practiced step, Jack kept his head down and moved his eyes to the side. He carried the incense boat and the censer, a small, hot, brassy furnace that burned a red coal. Whelan carried the aspergill with the holy water inside, and Father Eliot, the celebrant, moved ahead of them with his long, fluid steps, adorned with the white alb, bound tightly at the waist with the cincture, and the black cope of the funeral Mass.

Jack loved to watch the father prepare, as he buttoned

up his own cassock before the Mass. Father Eliot was very deliberate and sad-acting, and dressed with the care and precision of a gladiator. He had a long, sad face, like an old horse, and as Brother Martin helped him on with the perfectly starched alb, the father stared straight ahead. He pulled the cincture snug at the waist and insured that the ends of the bow he tied were equal in length. It was an exact ritual and he was alone in it. He threw the black, satin cope in the air, holding the front, and let it settle over his head. Jack thought his was an artistic way to dress. He thought the sound of the satin on the linen was graceful and that the way the cope floated in the air was graceful and artistic. The stole came last. Jack was most fond of the stole and the way the priest kissed precisely the cross in the middle of the garment and passed it gently over his sleek, wetted black hair and around his neck. Jack thought it was strange to kiss something so unalive with so much concentration. It was a wonderful thing, though, and the priest was alone in it. He would turn smiling. He seemed surprised to see anyone.

They were a slow procession between the pews to the front of the church. Jack swung the censer slightly side to side, and the smoke rose up around him. He'd lit the coal in the brass bowl before Mass, and as they stood in the vestibule, waiting to go up, the priest had poured on the

incense. Jack loved the look and feel of it. It looked like minced emeralds and rubies and sapphires and spit and snapped with the new, hot coal under it, and burned a lovely smell. It was the smell of the church. Every house in the neighborhood had its own smell, like the cabbage and baby smell of Whelan's house. The incense smoke mixed with the smell of the wine and the burning prayer candles and tall altar candles and the smell of floor wax and never left the church. It was this house's smell.

Now, as they neared the front of the church, the smoke boiling up in front of his face, Jack Handy was suddenly surprised to see the open casket of Stanley Supor. No one had said anything about an open casket. It wasn't like this for his uncle. He was surprised that he did not want to look at Stanley Supor, laid out dead in the aisle.

As they filed past the body, Jack kept his eyes away, and could hear the muffled cries and rustling of handkerchieves, quiet mourning from the tight-lipped Bohunks. Brother Martin, pressing his fingers into the flesh of Jack's neck, had said, "Just watch the father, bucko," and now Jack watched the priest's polished brogans, and walked slow and military around the casket and up the three steps to the altar, like the father's shadow.

The Mass began as Father Eliot passed his huge hands over the chalice, tracing a precise cross in the air. Jack

and Whelan bent low at each side of the father and raced off the magical words of the Mass. They read the Latin from long, laminated cards, and some of it they knew by heart. They inserted the correct phrases and prayers at the correct moment, beginning quickly when the priest, swallowing often, slowed by the lack of one lung, halted: "Confetior dei omnipotenti." They read swiftly the longest prayer of the Mass. And then, bending over, their foreheads just off the waxed floor in front of the altar, bowing in towards the priest, "mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa," through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault. They beat their breasts over their hearts with each phrase. And in between the mystical Latin sentences, the water and the wine, and the critical ringing of the bells, Jack tended the ember of the censer. With the small gold spoon, like a baby's spoon, Jack added the incense and slid down the brass-plated cover from the chain. He picked it up by the chain and swung it wide to each side to keep the air passing over the coal, to keep the incense burning. He fought his urge to watch the smoke move up and move around and above the rafters and search for an opening in the high ceiling. He tried hard not to look at the people here for this service, as they stood and sat and knelt with each correct prayer and the ringing of the bells. He did it during the regular Mass, the looking around. But not now. To look

straight ahead or look down. To not look at Stanley Supor. To look over the bowed heads of those first rows, past the Slovenian women in their black dresses, snuffling into their bright babushkas held against their chests. To look out over the bowed heads and across the veiled heads up to the clock, to the balcony. The organist paged through her music, and the woman singer stared up to the altar, waiting for the deep, slow nod from Father Eliot for her to begin the next song. She had been singing at funerals at Sts. Cyril and Methodius since Jack was very young. You could hear her ghosty Kyrie Eleison in the school next door. She had sung at his uncle's funeral. It was the same voice for everyone: a high, quavering voice close to crying, as though she herself had lost fifty or one hundred or five hundred brothers or fathers or children over the years in this church. She was thin. She had expelled the air from her lungs out over the dead for too many years.

Jack watched her and the organist point out places on the music until he put down the censer and went down to turn the linen curtain up over the rail for Communion. Now, at the last of the Mass, many of the women in back genuflected and hurried out in that odd gait women in church use, walking on their toes to keep their heels from clicking on the tile and drawing attention. These were the women with the flowered dresses, the working women. These were the

kind that a tough man like Stanley Supor would know best: wide-shouldered, pencil-in-the-hair waitresses and bar maids and close-mouthed clerks who like to cut loose. He had been the youth in them. They kept their hair colored a good red or blonde for him, and now he was going out. They rushed out to their jobs, to think about Stanley for the day, amid the rattle of glasses and plates and the clatter of typewriters. Jack watched their hair flash in the strong rays that filtered in through the stained glass. He looked at them slipping out, and kept his eyes to the back of the church, and made himself not look around.

Father Eliot gulped air and finished the Mass. Jack studied the floor and wondered if the rectory assigned Father Eliot to say the funerals because of his voice and his slow, slow movements. He seemed suited for it. Jack tried to think about other things. He liked the father. He had been a gymnast and had lost a lung to cancer. With just the one lung, he took a very long time to say anything. When he spoke from the altar, and the woman sang from the balcony, her throat quivering under the high notes, Jack had the idea that the father was saying a service for his own lung, forever mourning that dead part of himself that robbed him of his one passion. Still, with only the one lung, he tried his stunts on the single bar in the playground that sat across from the nun's convent and down the street from

the rectory. And after three or four perfectly executed propeller spins on the bar, his head narrowly missing the blacktop, the father excused himself from the crowd of kids and walked the block back to the rectory with that same funeral gait, without reverence, working the one lung hard.

Jack looked up when the congregation responded in Latin to Father Eliot's final prayer of the Mass. The priest passed his immense hands over the chalice, Father, Son, Holy Ghost, describing the cross in the air, and Jack and Whelan met him in front of the altar. Jack checked the coal in the censer. They all moved down the stairs, and the priest walked to the head of the casket and waited there for the two altar boys to join him with the instruments of the funeral, the censer and the aspergill. Then in one-lunged monotone he began: "Good and true Lord, we beseech You, watch over your servant Stanley." Jack was intent upon the even, side-to-side swing of the censer, careful to move it the exact distance from center each way and to keep the proper and precise rhythm. "Lord, we commit him to You, to the land of recompense and retribution." These were the same words they'd used for his uncle Bill, the correct words that got you into heaven. It must all be correct under the eye of God. Everything had to be perfect for it to work.

The priest took the aspergill from Whelan and generously sprinkled water over Stanley Supor in the sign of

the cross. Jack glanced over and Whelan rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, saying with his eyes, "let's get out of here."

The smoke rose up around Jack, and he could hear the strangled, coughy cries from the tight-lipped Bohunk relatives in the first rows near the casket. The smoke went up in grey columns to the rafters. These Bohunks from the Gulch were miner-tough people. They had been very quiet during the Mass, but now, with their eyes on the casket in the middle of the aisle, Jack began to hear muffled noises between the words of Father Eliot. Sure, this is when it gets them, he thought, when they realize these are the last words that will be said to their relative. No one would talk to him again ever. Jack's mother had cried then, that day they did this to his uncle. She was not one for crying. He heard her cry that day, and the day they pulled Jack from the river. But she was not one for crying. She hated crying.

Jack wanted everything to be right. It should be perfect. He passed the censer to the priest, and the father held it close to the end and shook it out over the head of Stanley Supor, the stole around his neck flying out like wings, the satin shimmering under the colored, stained glass rays from the afternoon sun. In the back corner of the church, near the confessional and under the glassy-eyed

statue of St. Theresa, Jack saw Brother Martin with his head down, asleep on a kneeler. He wanted everything to be right, but here was the brother sleeping through the whole damn thing. And without thinking, he looked quickly to the face of Stanley Supor.

Jack Handy had been trained well at home, so the hollow voice of the priest and the death songs from way high in the back of the church had not bothered him. But here on the face of the tough Bohunk brawler was water, water on his cheeks and eyelids and lips, leaving trails in the horrible make-up, like this toughest of men was crying. Sure, the priest had mourned in his way the loss of that one part of himself, and the Slovenes coughed and cried quietly about this loss from their family, but Jack had not expected these heavy holy water tears on the face of Mr. Tough Bohunk Stanley Supor from the Gulch. With his head propped on the cushion, the water eased down his face and made his lips wet, and they glistened under the lights overhead and the sun. His very last act on earth was to lay there like he was bawling from down deep, laid out in front of all those people to whom he'd been everything hard and fast, whirling through the dance halls and bars, blasting coal a mile under, splitting lips and ears of weaker men in the back lots of dives, the booze, the women: a fast, hard try at a life of devil-be-damned. It all came down to this: he

didn't care what they thought of him now, and he would cry. It seemed right, to cry for the one, true, real thing that he had loved.

The priest nudged Jack and gave him back the censer and went on with his prayers over the casket. Jack Handy watched the tears course down the square, coal-hard face of the Bohunk, and swinging the censer side to side in front of him, he was crying in the smoke. It wasn't good to cry in his own house. It just was not done. But now Jack thought of his uncle's face pressed into the satin cushion of the casket lid and he wanted to cry for him.

Before it had been too neat. Before it was not quite real. He had died quick and neat, alone with his guns, and they rushed him through the service and Jack's mother had cried only a little, not wanting to. They put him in a deep trench in a cemetery, out among the strips of barley, and covered him up. No one talked about it, and the only thing left to remember the whole thing was a little red dirt from the side of the grave, pushed up under the heels of Jack's best black shoes. That was it. And there had been the old man in the hospital, who was only very much asleep. There had been no real dying there. They looked him over and carted him out on a cold tray and that was the end. Jack remembered now the last gasps that had awakened him, from the other bed, as the grey, cold, old man struggled against

the sheet and the ugliness of going out alone.

Within the censer's smoke, as the voice of the one-lunged priest droned on, Jack remembered the comfortable company of the river as he drifted down, the company of his uncle's voice, and the low passing ducks coming in for the night, and then at once he was only very much alone under the freezing water of the Missouri. He thought about lying bloated and blue on the bank, cast up by the river, and he fought hard now against crying for himself. In the lonely services, on those dark mornings, deep in the dark belly of the rectory chapel, Jack had helped pray against the fear he had now.

After it was over and the six big Slovene coal miners had carried the casket out and gone off to bury it, Jack Handy explained as how the goddamn, sonsabitching smoke sure burned his eyes, and how it was an awful long service.

Whelan said, "Jack, you want to go down for pops?"

"Naw, I'm heading home."

"Well, I'll walk along."

"No, I'm going the long way."

Outside on the street, he peered up through the elms and saw the ducks move up in the distance, off the river, and over toward the long stretches of grain north of town.

He watched them sidle up to the stubble as he walked, and then, with his back pressed to the bark of a gnarled, winter-dead elm in front of his house, followed the flights until the big wind, humming around the overhead wires and hissing in the trees, burned his eyes. The windows of the house were steamed from cooking. Jack's mother waved from the kitchen, and then, above the moan of the Canada wind, he heard the huge bands of ducks calling to each other. They moved across a November sky, north.

You ought to see them now, Uncle Bill. I'll bet they're thick up there in the barley. Uncle Bill, we would follow them up and put on a good stalk and be in the middle of them. We would.

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